

REALLOCATION OF ARABLE LAND USE RIGHTS IN EARLY MODERN JAPAN:

HYPOTHESES ON ITS ORIGINS AND FUNCTIONS

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In contrast to standard interpretations that stress the direct ties between individual peasant and each piece of land, substantial evidence indicates that for up to half the arable land in Early Modern Japan, village communities controlled a family's access to farmland. This phenomenon was present in regions with diverse climatic, topographic, and economic characteristics. It can be documented from circa 1600 to well into the twentieth century.

In these regions, access to a given plot of land rotated via a lottery system that was most commonly known by the name, *warichi*, literally, "dividing the land. In the following discussion, I will use the terms "reallocation," "repartition," and "redistribution" interchangeably to refer to this phenomenon. Management of arable land in this fashion paralleled techniques employed throughout Japan to manage common lands and village forests. Indeed, it is tempting to speculate that common land management practices provided the model for repartition.¹

Since the mechanisms for establishing these systems were local, residing either in the villages or in the baronial domains (*han*) of daimyo, there was substantial variation in the procedures of reallocation. Differences are evident in almost all aspects of *warichi*: the terminology and specific mechanisms of operation, the circumstances which triggered reallocation, the intervals between reallocations, what lands were included, whether reallocations involved a redistribution of wealth or not, the locus of regulation, who participated, and how much practice deviated from legally defined principle. While these numerous vari-

ations make complete description of these systems impossible, I will sketch those principles which appear to be standard and also indicate some of the range of variation I have found to date.

The process of reallocation of land use rights typically began with a survey of all of the land to be distributed. It was measured, graded according to fertility, and divided into segments of uniform quality. Each segment was given an identifying label that was written on slip of paper or a bamboo stick. This survey made it possible to account for changes in the amount of arable land or in soil fertility that had occurred since the last repartition.

Villagers, too, were organized in such a way as to simplify the drawing of lots. All participating villagers were organized into lottery groups (*kuji kumi*). Each group would draw for rights to equal amounts of land. When a household held rights to cultivate as much land as comprised a whole unit, the "group" would consist of only that one household. Smaller cultivators combined to form a group.

After all preparations had been made, the group representatives drew lots for fields in each category of land. If the group was comprised of a single household, the process was now complete. If several households formed a group, they held a second lottery to further subdivide the land among themselves in proportion to the size of their cultivation rights. By the final drawing, each household held rights to cultivate lands comprised of the same proportions of superior, average, and poor quality land as any other participating household.² Although there are

some examples of redistribution of wealth through reallocation, in general, each shareholder held the same percentage of village land after the process as before.

Once the land was apportioned among peasant households they were able to dispose of their cultivation rights as they saw fit. Just like shareholders in a modern corporation, peasants could buy, sell, rent, bequeath, or inherit these tenurial rights as well as work the land on their own. In effect, these cultivation rights were comparable to holding shares of stock in a village agricultural corporation.

This general overview, is sufficient to indicate that repartition required a great deal of work.³ Resurvey of the village could take up to a month.⁴ In principle, it required some re-drawing of field boundaries--a consequence which entailed construction of new paddy ridges. The whole process was also likely to be tension filled as villagers debated soil quality and closely observed land survey measurements.

In spite of this heavy cost in time and labor, many villages repartitioned their lands frequently, sometimes annually, more commonly every three to eight years.⁵ In other instances the interval could be several decades. Where reallocations took place regularly, the interval depended on local laws or custom. In some areas, redistributions occurred only after land was added to or lost from cultivation.

Why undertake this burdensome project? What benefits were gained? What circumstances encouraged its use? A combination of natural, administrative, family, labor market conditions and the

demands of wet rice agriculture provide a starting point for answering these questions.

The first documented appearances of redistributive systems coincides with the widespread establishment of villages as the units of land tax assessment and corporate tax-paying responsibility in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Satsuma domain's unique system of allocating cultivation rights based on the number of adult males in a household may constitute an exception to this observation—it is possibly a holdover from an earlier time—but I am unable to confirm this.

Collective responsibility for land tax payment imposed two burdens on villagers to which *warichi* was one possible answer.⁶ Collective taxpaying responsibility was not a sufficient impetus to adoption of *warichi*. Redistributive practices even survived the abolition of collective tax paying responsibility in some areas, yet in combination with other factors it was often a precipitating factor.

First, villagers had to determine how to allocate land taxes, their largest tax obligation, among themselves. If everyone held the same average quality of land, taxes could readily be fixed at a flat percentage of the value of each family's cultivation rights.

Second, villagers had to assure that once allocated, each responsible taxpayer fulfilled his obligation and did not impose the burden of any unpaid taxes on other villagers. This factor, was particularly challenging in regions where agricultural conditions were unstable, for example, land susceptible to drought,

flooding, and landslides, or recently reclaimed land.⁷ This instability is one prominent characteristic of the districts in which reallocation was widely practiced.

In unstable agricultural environments, reallocation provided a form of insurance and a diversified portfolio of lands in which farm labor was invested. If anyone held a disproportionate amount of vulnerable or low-quality land and disaster struck, their ability to pay that year's taxes, and even to continue farming, was jeopardized. By sharing the cultivation of these lands through *warichi*, all villagers bore part of the risk and cost, but the likelihood of any one family being forced out of agriculture and a productive, taxpaying role was reduced. Right to cultivate poor quality holdings were balanced by others to better quality land, diversifying each cultivator's agricultural investment portfolio and reducing risk to more manageable proportions.

Harsh natural conditions provided a second impetus to redistribute. A number of areas in which *warichi* predominates were marked by severe winters. Heavy snows, widespread freezing and ice created widespread damage to irrigation and other water control facilities. While domain administrations took charge of trunk lines, many smaller irrigation canals and water works had to be repaired quickly by local communities themselves. In regions of low population density and poorly developed labor markets, characteristics which also seem to typify areas of redistribution practices, only village labor was available. By using *warichi* practices communities maintained the maximum pos-

sible supply of self-interested labor to maintain these projects. To the extent that there is a contemporary parallel, it might be that of the electric power industry which has to plan its generating capacity based on peak, not average needs. Thus *warichi* villages might have a surplus of labor on a day to day basis, but would have enough to cover peak demand during the brief interval before rice cultivation when water control facilities commonly required major repairs. That these demands played some role is supported by the general lack of redistributive systems both in areas marked by more advanced development of day labor markets where a substitute for cultivator labor could be found, and in the relatively underpopulated areas in which the development of water control and irrigation facilities was not yet extensive, e.g., extreme northern Japan, and the need to guarantee a supply of labor was reduced.

Two other general considerations also seem to play a role. First, since *warichi* was exceptional in the most economically advanced and populous regions of Japan, it appears that most villages where it was practiced offered less opportunity for alternative sources of income. Primary, non-commercial agriculture played a larger role in these communities than those areas near major population concentrations such as the Kanto (Edo) and Kinai (Osaka/Kyoto). The lack of alternative employment reinforced the coercive strength of the village as a corporate entity. It could withhold access to green manure, kindling, irrigation water, and other products essential to a family's survival.

Second, in the villages of these regions, each village would have been dominated by only a few lineages. This provided an

added incentive to cooperate--the good of the whole lineage was involved, not just an individual household. Furthermore, even if the system might not have worked to the advantage or desires of smaller households, they would have been economically dependent on the main family line and hard-pressed to resist participation.

My remarks so far have concerned redistributive systems under the control of villages; however, a number of domains stepped in to initiate, systematize, or extend these practices. Usually they built on sets of existing practices, systematizing and extending them. Their interest in doing so was five-fold. First, they tried to limit the potential for conflict over reallocation of cultivation rights by assuring equitable practices. Second, they saw these practices as a device for simplifying land tax assessment. They did not have to set tax rates on each grade of land in each village. Third, the practice increased the likelihood of full land tax payment. Fourth, it helped maintain a large agricultural population, which many political economists of the day considered the major means of increasing crop yields and hence, domain wealth. Finally, by encouraging redistributions, villagers were forced to survey lands for the domain in a context which made it difficult for any villager to keep secretly re-claimed, unregistered land off the tax rolls. Despite these motivations, domain administrators were generally unsuccessful in forcing redistribution on recalcitrant villagers. They simply lacked the means to exert that degree of control.

Where redistribution persisted, it was under the following conditions: 1) The village bore major corporate responsibili-

ties to higher administrative authorities and maximum participation of villagers was highly desirable. 2) Harsh, unstable agricultural conditions created both high risks to continued successful cultivation and 3) challenges to provide labor adequate to maintain the water control systems necessary for maximizing wet rice yields. While these conditions were present in much of Japan, two other circumstances may distinguish the regions which practiced *warichi*. (4) These regions were insufficiently developed to provide a good labor market capable of replacing self-interested labor and reinforced a family's dependence on agriculture and incentives to cooperate with other villagers. Finally, since these were regions in which villages were still dominated by a very small number of extended family lineages, social and cultural values reinforced the cooperative spirit *warichi* demanded. In the absence of motivation at the village level, domain administrators could not successfully force the adoption of redistributive practices.

Notes

¹ Direct evidence is not presently available to support this conjecture.

² Readers familiar with the procedures for allocating access to the common lands from which peasants collected firewood, grasses for fertilizer, etc., will recognize a close similarity between the *warichi* mechanism and those used to control access to commons. This similarity raises the interesting question of whether or not there is a relationship between the two systems. Because of a lack of data, however, it is not possible to clearly indicate whether or not there was a relationship and if so, what the nature of that relationship was. If there is one, I suspect that in general corporate control of the commons preceded *warichi*. Two scenarios are possible, one which is propelled by local population growth and the other by changes in land tax administration. In the first instance, population in a region grew and encouraged the expansion of arable. As arable expanded, common lands were lost to cultivation. As common "wasteland" became an increasingly scarce resource, peasants would have needed to develop controlled access. Only with the expansion of arable into marginal land would there have arisen a need to repartition arable land. Second, even if we were to assume that the stimulus to repartition of arable was not the extension of assart and reclamation into very marginal lands, but rather the imposition of village responsibility for land taxation, the origin of commons, a medieval development, probably preceded

repartition. Once *warichi* became established custom, it probably moved even into those areas of reclamation and assart that were large enough to form the basis for new villages (*shinmura*).

³ For full details of these procedures and descriptions of some of the principal variations in Echigo, see *Niigata ken ni okeru warichi seido*, pps. 58-92.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 93; Aono, "Echigo ni okeru warichisei," p. 104. However, if there were no major change in village conditions, there were conventions that permitted the use of old divisions and gradations.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pps. 93-98.

⁶ The system there was called *kadowari*. The *kado* existed prior to the seventeenth century, but there is no evidence that it was a unit of land reallocation.

⁷ Reclaimed paddy requires a number of years to stabilize. A key factor the time it take to properly prepare the paddy bottom so that irrigation water doesn't drain through the bed and make it difficult to keep an adequate supply of water in the field.